



RACISM IN PAULE MARSHALL'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Brown girl Brownstone is the first novel of the American famous writer Paule Marshall published in 1959. The novel records the interface of two distinct cultures and also portrays immigrant families facing the barriers of racism and class. How Afro-Americans had to struggle and compete with the dominant white society for social equality. The novel records the immigrants racial experiences. Paule Marshall's novel was among the first to portray the inner life of a young female African-American, as well as depicting the cross-cultural conflict between West Indians and American blacks. The primary characters include Selina and Ina Boyce and their parents, who suffer from racism and extreme poverty in 1959.

KEYWORDS: Racism, cross cultural conflict, Afro –American, immigrants, poverty.

INTRODUCTION:

The West Indian immigrants, had come to America because they wanted a better living. Brought there as slaves, they had to develop hybrid culture, based on their African origins but very much affected by the British systems that held them in bondage. The racism in Barbados that the Boyce family tried to escape follows them in their migration to America. The setting of the novel *Brown girl Brownstone* is in Brooklyn, New York in 1939. The central characters of the novel are immigrants Silla and Deighton Boyce from Caribbean and their daughter Selina Boyce first generation American girl of Barbadian descent. The Boyce family lives in a brownstone house in Brooklyn with several other tenants. Deighton wants to return to the land he inherited in Barbados and Silla his wife who is obsessed with owning a Brooklyn Brownstone. Silla secretly sells her husband's land in Barbados to buy a brownstone. Paule Marshall presents a depressing and symbolic ending with Selina desiring to Americanize but falling the barriers of racism and class.

DISCUSSION:

The immigrant community in the novel are bent to the common goal: the owning of a Brownstone, the possession of property, as a bulwark against poverty, racism, and failure.

In Brown girl, Brownstones, we are placed in a black Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York in 1939. Much of the story mirrors Marshall's own upbringing. Thousands of Barbadians, from 1900 to 1940 went to America to escape poverty and lack of opportunity in that British colony. They worked incessantly to become a part of the American dream and to buy house. This desire however, tended to push them further away from their own history and culture... (Marshall 1959: 221)

Deighton had to deal with racial discrimination and rejection throughout his whole life. Continual racial discrimination makes Deighton feel inferior and feels the need to prove his worth which he does by his appearance. He dresses well so that he is taken seriously and treated with respect and not rejected due to his skin colour. His definition of being a man is:

He wears the best of clothes. He eats the finest. He rides in the swellest cars. That's the way a man does do things... (85)

Deighton is unable to do things this way, so he feels inferior. The paragraph below shows how dressing was important to him: *Dressing for him was always a pleasurable ritual. Tonight, as usual, he carefully inspected the crease in his trousers, brushed his coarse hair till it lay flat, and puzzled over the many pairs of shoes in his closet before he chose a new pair of white and brown spectators" (22)*

Deighton's wish to be treated like white people can also be seen in his search for a job, where he encounters racism. Even though he is well dressed, Deighton is rejected from well paying jobs because of his black skin.

"He was always putting himself up in the face of the big white people in town asking for some big job—and they would chuck him out fast enough. He was always dressing up like white people." (33).

Despite many rejections he is still looking for big jobs which are offered only to

white people. One incident, after studying accounting course for two years, he goes to look for a job. Silla asks him: *"Which places are you going?" The three places offering the best salary." With a look*

both cruel and pitying she said, You don't want no job "and turned to the children "Instead of him going to small office where he might have a chance – no, he got to play like he's white Silla lemma tell you something, he interrupted, His smile gone and annoyance darkening his face, "I ain looking for nothing small. I ain been studying this course off and on for near two years to take no small job. Tha's the trouble with wunna coloured people. Wunna is satisfied with next skin to nothing. Please Mr. White man, le' the boy go to Harris College so he can be a school master making \$10.00 a month. Please, Mr. White-man, lemma buy one of these old house, you don't want no more. No I ain with wunna. It got to be something big for cause I got big plans or nothing at all. Tha's the way A man does do things!" (Ibidem:82-83)

Deighton tried very hard to "be white, to meet their standards, but they ignored his good education and his good clothes because of his colour. Deighton is so obsessed to be treated like white that he does not want to be settled with a small job and be a responsible father and husband. These feelings of inferiority and shortcomings in the duties to his family are due to many racial discrimination he faces.

Paule Marshall presents a depressing and symbolic ending with Selina desiring to Americanize but falling the barriers of racism and class. The incidences of Racism made Selina realize who she was in America because of her black skin.

Selina is seen in her first modern dance club meeting as the odd one out. Though she is a great dancer she is thought of as non-existent. She is inherently treated as an inferior individual due to her appearance. Marshall makes a lot of reference to appearance such as, *"dark forms amid the white faces"* "small white finger", etc. She states this to argue that appearance does matter significantly.

Selina attends a college, joins a dance club, and gives her first successful public performance. At this point, at a celebration of her success, she is subjected to the racism of the mother of one of the chorus girls, Margaret Benton. When speaking about her former West Indian maids, Margaret's mother says, *"No...? Where then? "The West Indies" "The woman sat back, triumphant. "Ah, I thought so. We once had a girl who did our cleaning who was from there..." "She caught herself and smiled apologetically. "Oh, she wasn't a girl, of course. We just called them that. It's a terrible habit... Anyway, I always told my husband there was something different about her—about Negroes from the West Indies in general...I don't know what but I can always spot it. When you came in tonight, for instance..." (Ibidem:287)*

As her friend's mother insists that American Negroes are somehow different from West Indians, Selina realizes that although she did not want to be cut out of the same cloth as every Barbadian, she will be seen by the white world not as Selina but as a blurred figure with an accent. Oh, it's not their fault, of course, poor things! You can't help your color... It's just a lack of the proper training and education.... Your race needs more smart young people like you." (Ibidem:288)

"But when she looked up and saw her reflection in those pale eyes, she knew that the women saw one thing above all else. Those eyes were a well lighted mirror

in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw- with a sharp and shattering clarity- the full meaning of her black skin” (Ibidem289).

“Oh, please say something in that delightful West Indian accent for us! ” (Ibidem: 289)

Selina runs out of the house and collapses in the entrance way of a vacant store. She examines her image in the store window: “She peered shyly at her reflection –the way a child looks at himself in the mirror. And in a sense, it was a discovery for her also” (Ibidem290-291)

CONCLUSION:

This instance of racism had a lasting impact on Selina and her believes who she was. Throughout the novel Selina wanted to be identified and assimilated to American culture.

REFERENCES:

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